'Home' in Samoa: R.L. Stevenson and the South Pacific

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After ten years of ill health during which he lived in many different places (England, Scotland, Switzerland, France, the United States), Robert Louis Stevenson sailed with his family towards the South Pacific hoping to benefit from its milder climates. It was the summer of 1888. During his travels and residence in many islands, the Scottish author generally felt better and repeatedly changed his plans to return home. In January 1890, he communicated an alarming news to his friends: not only had he bought land and intended to build a house on the island of Upolu in the Samoan archipelago but when he returned home it would be to 'break up' his establishment there. Stevenson never went back and lived the rest of his life in the South Pacific (he died in 1894).

My paper will examine the author's decision to settle in Samoa and his description of his establishment there in order to show how his house, 'Vailima', can be read both as a literal and figurative example of his encounter with the Pacific colonial world through his own cultural heritage, the blending of Scottish and Samoan, old and new, personal and political. The main object of my study will be Stevenson's extant correspondence for which I will refer to the Yale Edition by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew[1].

Before analysing the author's decision to live in the South Pacific we must consider what he meant by 'home'. In his correspondence of the period, the term shifts between different meanings according to address and reference. In a letter of November 1888 to his Edinburgh friend, Charles Baxter, Stevenson includes his "attempt at words to Wandering Willie" (*Letters*, vol. 6, p. 222). His version of the Scottish song begins thus: "Home no more home to me, whither shall I wander?" Stevenson was then writing from the village of Tautira, on the island of Tahiti, and nostalgically evoking Scotland. His native land was ever present during his life in the South Pacific, both in his memories and writings (*Record of a Family of Engineers*, *Catriona*, *Weir of Hermiston*, *St. Ives*), and Baxter was the main interlocutor to whom he could express this connection with his country and his past[2].

However, it was not Scotland the author referred to when he communicated his plans to return 'home' after his Pacific travels. This is clearly stated in a letter of 2 December 1889 to his

[1] *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, edited by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, Yale University Press, 1994-1995.
[2] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 207 and pp. 358-361.

friend and editor, Sidney Colvin: "My dear fellow, now that my father is done with his troubles, and 17 Heriot Row no more than a mere shell, you and the gaunt old Monument in Bloomsbury are all that I have in view when I use the word home; some passing thoughts there may be of the rooms at Skerryvore, and the blackbirds in the chine on a May morning; but the essence is S.C. and the Museum"[3].

The 'Monument' was the author's way of jokingly describing Colvin's house in the precincts of the British Museum where the latter worked as Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings. 'Heriot Row' was Stevenson's family home in Edinburgh and 'Skerryvore' his house in Bournemouth, a town in the South of England where he lived with his wife Fanny from 1884 to 1887, the longest period they ever spent in one place before reaching Samoa. While Scotland thus represented his past – the house where he grew up was a 'mere shell' now that his father was gone; England stood for his present. It was in London with Sidney Colvin that Stevenson felt he belonged.

Interestingly, the letter quoted above was written on the schooner *Equator*, 190 miles off the coast of Samoa. Less than two months later, on 20 January 1890, the author announced to his Bournemouth friends, Lady Taylor and Dr Thomas Bodley Scott, he had decided to settle in the Polynesian archipelago and planned to return to England only for a visit. His new 'home' would be in the South Pacific[4].

In reading Stevenson's correspondence of the time, this radical decision may seem abrupt yet it is not surprising. Stevenson often modified his plans during his Pacific voyages. His health was a major factor in these changes. After the cruise on the schooner *Casco* to the Marquesas, the Paumotu (Tuamotu) and Tahiti (28 June 1888 - 24 January 1889), he planned to stay in Hawaii for a couple of months before returning home. Yet the weather there was 'colder' than in the islands he had recently visited and this made him dread the idea of going back to England and probably being confined again "to my old life of the house and sick-room"[5]. During his cruise on the *Casco*, he had enjoyed good health and had been able to do things previously unimaginable such as sea-bathing and living "almost entirely in the open air"[6]. The contrast with his life at home was sharp.

It was thus that instead of leaving Hawaii in April 1889 on his homeward journey, Stevenson wrote to his friends that he was going to postpone his return for another year in order to "go farther afield in the Pacific, and see more, and get more health, and get (I do not doubt) to love this part of the world better than ever"[7]. The author and his family left Hawaii in June on the trading schooner *Equator* and headed toward the Gilbert Islands. His growing interest in the Pacific region and his

[3] Ibid., vol. 6, p. 337.
[4] Ibid., vol. 6, pp. 351-354.
[5] Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (1896), edited by Neil Rennie, Penguin, London, 1998, p. 5.
[6] See Fanny Stevenson's letter to Colvin of 4 December [1888] in *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 227.
[7] *Letters*, vol. 6 p. 268.

desire to write an ethno-historical account of his travels, a big book on the 'South Seas', were another determining factor. The new voyage would provide new material, "it would be madness to come home now, with an imperfect book", Stevenson wrote to Colvin from Honolulu on 2 April 1889[8].

During the preparations for this second cruise, the author often mentioned Samoa as a possible stop in his itinerary. Yet it was not the first time he addressed the archipelago in his correspondence. Shortly before planning his second voyage, he had written a letter to the Editor of *The Times* (10 February 1889) in which he described the colonial disputes in Samoa between Germany, Britain and the United States[9]. Though he had not yet visited the islands and was still planning to return home in the summer, he felt compelled to write about what he knew of their political situation after talking with King Kalakaua of Hawaii.

Samoa, moreover, had been present in the author's imagination for many years. In a letter of May 1889 to Edward L. Burlingname, Stevenson mentions how he should have moved there "fifteen years ago […] as I truly designed to, under the spur of Mr. Seed's advice"[10]. William Seed was a public servant from New Zealand whom he had met in the summer of 1875. Seed had described the South Pacific to Stevenson ("till I was sick with desire to go there") and particularly recommended Samoa as a place to live[11].

It was thus for a combination of reasons that the author's decision to buy land and settle on the island of Upolu was not as sudden as it may initially seem. On the one hand, it fulfilled his need to find a place where his health could improve and responded to his desire to stay in the Pacific, a 'temptation' he had admitted to Baxter shortly after the cruise of the *Casco* (8 February 1889); on the other, it was an excellent location for its mail service, being on the naval route between Sydney and San Francisco. This meant keeping in regular contact with his friends, publishers and readers in England and the United States[12].

In addition, Samoa reminded Stevenson of Scotland. The island of Upolu, the author notes, "has beautiful rivers, of about the bigness of our waters in the Lothians, with pleasant fords and waterfalls and overhanging verdure, and often a great volume of sound, so that once I thought I was passing near a mill, and it was only the voice of the river"[13]. Upolu's nature was similar to Edinburgh's surroundings.

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[8] Ibid., vol.6, p. 275.
[9] This was the first of ten letters that were subsequently published by *The Times*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Daily Chronicle* between 1889 and 1894, in which Stevenson addressed He would later publish a book on the subject titled *A Footnote to History. Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892).
[10] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 299.
[11] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 145.
[12] See Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Methuen & Co., London, 1901, vol. 2, p. 89.
[13] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 347.

During his Pacific travels, the author often compared what he saw to his native land, both from a natural and a cultural standpoint. The points of similarity between "a South Sea people and some of my own folk at home," Stevenson observed in his account of his voyages, "ran much in my head in the islands; and not only inclined me to view my fresh acquaintances with favour, but continually modified my judgement"[14]. The analogies he saw between the plight of 18th century Scottish Highlanders and the condition of natives in the Pacific colonial world, provided him with a means of understanding the peoples he encountered. Rousing and sharing a sense of "kinship", the author believed, was a fundamental ingredient in the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange. Otherwise it was better not to travel at all.

If England was the 'home' of his literary and intellectual constituency, Scotland represented his cultural identity, the source from which he quarried the material he bartered with the natives to acquire knowledge of their cultures. "[What] I knew of the Cluny Macphersons, or of the Appin Stewarts", Stevenson comments, "enabled me to learn, and helped me to understand, about the Tevas of Tahiti"[15]. It was through Scotland that the author encountered the Pacific.

Not only did Upolu therefore remind him of the surroundings of Edinburgh – and perhaps this resemblance contributed to his choice – but he experienced his new home through his strong bond with his country and cultural heritage. This emerges clearly in the author's description of his house and life in Samoa.

First of all we must bear in mind that Stevenson's decision to settle also involved his family. His mother, Margaret, his wife, Fanny and her son Lloyd had travelled with him to the Pacific on the *Casco*. Margaret returned to Scotland after this first cruise, but Lloyd, Fanny and her daughter's husband, Joe Strong, went with him on the *Equator*. In Samoa they would all live together joined by Fanny's daughter, Belle Strong and her son Austin. On 10 January 1890[16], the author signed the legal deed for the purchase of 314 acres two miles inland from Apia, the capital of Samoa[17]. He named his estate 'Vailima' (in Samoan 'five waters'), because of the streams that ran through the land[18]. The grounds were covered with dense vegetation and had to be cleared in order to build a house and develop a cacao plantation that was to help Stevenson support his extended family.

The author and his wife left for Sydney in February 1890, while the American trader H. J. Moors supervised work at Vailima. They planned to return to England in the summer and "wind up"[19] their affairs there, but the author fell gravely ill in Australia and the only remedy seemed to go

[14] *In the South Seas*, p. 13.
[15] *Ibidem*.
[16] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 352, note 1.
[17] *Life*, vol. 2, p. 88.
[18] See *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 393; *Life*, vol. 2, p. 106.
[19] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 353.

on a third cruise on the steamer *Janet Nichol* (April - July 1890). When they returned to Samoa in September 1890 he and Fanny moved to a temporary cottage that had been built on their estate so they could live there while supervising the building of their 'Old Colonial Home'[20].

Vailima provided an abundance of tropical products (bananas, breadfruit, cocoanuts, guavas, taro, mangos, oranges, limes, etc.), but the cacao plantation was not successful. The "irregular and rocky surface of the ground made it difficult to keep clean, and also caused the plantation to be very straggling and irregular"[21]. Stevenson, his cousin Graham Balfour observes, was not fit "to be the successful manager of a plantation run for his own profit"[22].

The house on the other hand was a splendid achievement. In April 1891, a first section was completed and the author could finally move to his own space where he could "shut my door and make my own confusion", after living six months in close quarters, "in the midst of all the myriad misfortunes of the planter's life"[23]. By January 1893, the second part of the house was also finished[24]. The building, Balfour notes, "consisted of two blocks of equal size, placed […] in échelon. It was made "of wood throughout, painted a dark green outside, with a red roof of corrugated iron". The downstairs accommodation consisted of "three rooms, a bath a storeroom and cellars below, with five bedrooms and the library upstairs". Stevenson's room was obtained by boarding in half of the upstairs verandah. Balfour describes it as "a sort of martin's nest, plastered as it were upon the outside of the house"[25].

The furniture at Vailima was a combination of pieces from Skerryvore, Heriot Row and the author's Pacific travels. In the large hall which "occupied the whole of the ground floor of the newer portion of the house" and was "lined and ceiled with varnished redwood from California"[26], there were, among other things, an oak cabinet, two Burmese statues, paintings by Stevenson's cousin Bob, Sargent's portrait of the author and Fanny, and a plaster group by Rodin. In the bedrooms the floors were covered with native mats and there were *tapa* hangings on the walls. The library, Balfour recalls, was "lined with books […] The most important divisions were the shelves allotted to the history of Scotland, to French books either modern or relating to the fifteenth century, to military history, and to books relating to the Pacific"[27].

The Vailima household embodied a similar blending of Scottish, American and Samoan. "I am the head of the household of five whites, and twelve Samoans", Stevenson wrote to George

[20] Ibid., vol. 6, p. 393.
[21] *Life*, vol. 2, p. 118.
[22] *Ibidem*.
[23] *Letters*, vol. 7, p. 63.
[24] Ibid., vol. 7, p. 464.
[25] *Life*, vol. 2, pp. 107-108.
[26] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 109.
[27] Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 108-109.

Meredith on 5 September 1893, "to all of whom I am the chief and father; my cook comes to me and asks leave to marry – and his mother, a fine old chief woman, who has never lived here, does the same"[28]. The author, Jenni Calder observes, "liked to be chief of his clan, to feel that he was able to care for his people"[29]. Vailima allowed Stevenson to fashion himself as a land proprietor and clan leader according to the values of traditional Scottish culture. A "larger sense of family relations, or generous sentiment of clanship", he believed, "is the only road to safety for troubled mankind as a race"[30].

Stevenson's words highlight the ethical stance that underlay his position as employer of Samoan workers and characterised his involvement in Samoan politics ever since his first letter to *The Times*. The author, however, was also aware of the practical advantages of being recognized as a chief. "[No] Samoan works except for his family", he wrote in December 1893 to a New Zealand journalist, "[a]ccordingly in order to insure permanent service in Samoa I have tried to play the native chief with necessary European variations. Just now it looks as if I was succeeding"[31]. Clanship was an ethical matter yet it was also part of the colonial game.

'Vailima', the house and the household, can thus be read as an example of Stevenson's encounter with the Pacific colonial world through his own cultural heritage, a dynamics of cross-cultural exchange that shaped both his experience of the region and his writings about it.

[28] *Letters*, vol. 8, p. 163.
[29] Jenni Calder, *RLS: A Life Study*, Hamish Hamilton, London, p. 283.
[30] *Letters*, vol. 6, p. 296.
[31] Ibid., vol. 8, p. 200.